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SUBJECT: CHILD MARRIAGE IN BANGLADESH

REF: SECSTATE 36341

1. (U) After consulting with government officials, the NGO community and UN agencies stationed in Dhaka, Embassy Dhaka is pleased to respond to the Child Marriage survey sent out by Washington.

A. The legal age of marriage in Bangladesh is 18 for girls and 21 for boys. There is not a lower legal age for marriage with parental consent, however, in practice it happens frequently.

B. In Bangladesh, underage marriage is a significant problem among the population at large. Reliable statistics about underage marriage in Bangladesh are difficult because marriage registrations are sporadic and birth registrations to verify children's actual age are not universal. According to one study published in October 2002 from the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and supported through UNICEF, 51 percent of girls and 7 percent of boys aged 13 to 22 are married. The survey reveals that "marriage is the dominant reality for rural adolescent girls." The Bangladesh Children Rights Forum, conducted a survey last year finding the average age of marriage between 10-15 for girls and 15-18 for boys. Additionally they estimate that 9 million child marriages happen a year and that around 40 percent of all marriages are child marriages.

Underage marriage has multiple adverse affects on the well being of the child ranging from health problems to stunting personal and professional development. According to the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs report, "marriage is the major reason that girls drop out of school." As a result, the Bangladesh government offers stipends for girls' school expenses only if parents promise to delay their daughters' marriage until age 18.

C. USAID has been funding an Adolescent Reproductive Health Program which encourages later marriage among Bangladeshi youth. Through a collaborative process involving local youth, an Adolescent Reproductive Health Toolkit has been developed. Each toolkit has corresponding video tapes, CD videos, and facilitator guides. Additionally, comic books, radio and television programs were developed for this target audience. Current plans include a strong marketing and dissemination strategy. Encouraging later marriage is a central message among the adolescent health issues covered in this program.

USAID also funds democracy and governance programs targeted at women and children which indirectly address the issue of child marriage as well as a health program that advocates immediate birth registration.

THOMAS